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Nothing but Cold Ashes? The Cairn Burials of Jebel Qurma, Northeastern Jordan

Peter M. M. G. Akkermans and Merel L. Brüning

The Jebel Qurma range: basalt-covered mounds and plateaus, with endless plains of gravel and rock in front of them.

Some 130 km east of Amman, close to the Jordanian-Saudi border, is the barren range of Jebel Qurma. This area is an extensive and rugged low basalt massif, with steep-sided, basalt-covered prominences and rocky dissected plateaus, all of which make travel in this region difficult. Extensive gravel plains extend beyond the forbidding, basaltic uplands, alternating with mud flats of varying size and low ranges of limestone hillocks. The area is highly arid, with an average annual precipitation of less than 50 mm. The hot summers and often severe winters add substantially to the harsh and inhospitable character of the Jebel Qurma heights. Captain Lionel Rees, who was in the region in the early 1900s, described the hostile area: “Except for a short period in the spring the whole of this country looks like a dead fire – nothing but cold ashes” (Rees 1929: 389). It comes as no surprise that the landscape remains difficult to inhabit, except for the occasional small and dispersed Bedouin groups. Nowadays, single tents occur here and there near wadis and mud flats for a couple of weeks in the rainy season, each of them usually several kilometers away from their nearest neighbor. These people seem to come mainly from the region around Irbid and Mafraq in northern Jordan and bring their herds of sheep and goats by truck to the Jebel Qurma area for grazing, but only in years with sufficient rainfall.

The rather uninviting appearance of Jebel Qurma is difficult to reconcile with the astonishingly rich archaeological and epigraphic record of the region, which testifies to the presence of indigenous peoples that wandered about the basalt range many hundreds or even thousands of years ago. There are very large

numbers of stone-built installations of different types and sizes, in addition to the innumerable pieces of rock art and texts in ancient North Arabian script. They demonstrate that Jordan’s northeastern desert was once home to thriving desert lifeways, thus challenging any preconceived ideas of marginality or cultural insignificance. Environmental conditions may have been more favorable (wetter, greener) during some periods in the past than today, although this is still a matter of investigation.

Hilltop Cairns

It goes without saying that in any region where people once lived in substantial numbers, they must have died in equally large numbers. While the foci of daily living and domestic activity were in secluded areas at the foot of the basaltic uplands or in the deep valleys through which wadis run, it appears that the preferential areas for the disposal of the dead were on the surrounding high plateaus and the summits of the basalt hills.

“Except for a short period in the spring the whole of this country looks like a dead fire – nothing but cold ashes” (Rees 1929: 389).

Our recent surveys and excavations in these relatively remote, high locales in the Jebel Qurma region, away from the main areas of habitation, have identified many hundreds of cairns. These are mounds of stone of varying shapes and sizes that were usually set up as the burial place of local inhabitants (fig. 1). They range from low and roughly circular heaps of stone about 1.5 m across and 0.7–0.8 m in height to impressive tombs up to 10 m in diameter and 2 m in height. Some cairns were conical mounds of basalt blocks, sometimes provided with a constellation of



Figure 1. A typical hilltop cairn in the Jebel Qurma region, with its conical pile of basalt blocks.



Figure 2. Documenting a small cairn in the Early Bronze Age cemetery in the Jebel Qurma area.

up to several dozen smaller cairns. Other tombs were in the form of sizable round towers, which could have smaller cist graves attached to them. Many cairns had a circular or, more often, crescent-shaped installation consisting of a low and roughly piled stone wall added to their exterior, which may have served for ritual purpose at the time of burial and mourning. Occasionally shallow fireplaces were located in these features, which, according to analyzed radiocarbon dates, appear to stem from repeated visits to these cairns in Medieval to modern times. Finally, small circles of upright-standing stones occur near some of the cairns, suggesting some kind of funerary meaning. The stone circles are about 1.2 m across, and while they had no covering, their interiors were partly filled with small blocks and pebbles to create a level surface or “platform.”

In general, the deceased were put to rest either in a small burial chamber or simply between the rocks filling in the cairns. Hence they were essentially graves *above* ground, with the corpses merely resting below a cover of stones and close to the

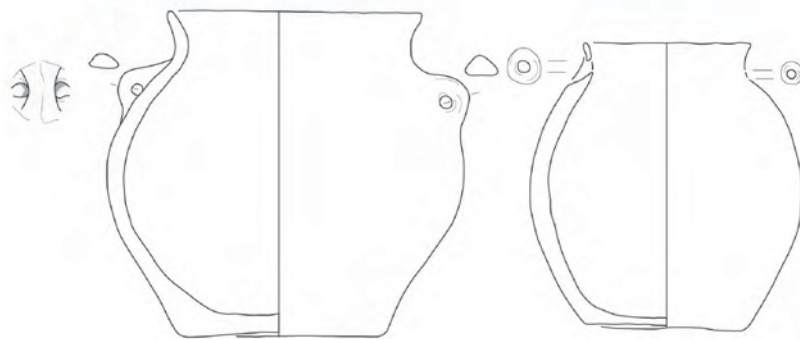


Figure 3. Pottery vessels found in the tombs of the Early Bronze Age cairn field.



Figure 4. The tower tomb at the site of QUR-2, with its straight façade made of large basalt slabs. Many of these building stones weigh around 200–300 kg, suggesting that the construction of the tower was the work of a team instead of an individual.



Figure 5. A beautiful piece of rock art from the burial site of QUR-529, showing an archer hunting two lions. The associated inscription in Safaitic reads: *l rgl bn zmhr bn 's h-hyt*, which is translated "By Rāgel son of Zamhar son of 'Aws are the animals."



Figure 7. A colorful necklace with beads made of stone, glass, and shell, from one of the cist graves at the site of QUR-2.



Figure 6. A 3D image of the tower tomb and its associated burials at the site of QUR-2 in the Jebel Qurma region: (1) central tower tomb of the first century B.C. to first century C.E.; (2–5) cist graves (and remnants thereof) of the first to second century C.E.; (6–7) late Ottoman to colonial-period Islamic cairns. Indication of scale: the central tower is 4.8 m in exterior diameter.



Figure 8. Earrings made of bronze and gold, from the cist graves at the site of QUR-2 (nos. 1–3) and from one of the ring cairns at QUR-9 (no. 4).

surface. True inhumations, in the sense of burial pits dug into the ground, seem to occur relatively late in the local sequence, namely, from the fourth century C.E. or Byzantine period onwards.

Investigation into the complex nature of these cairns is not always easy. An unfortunate (predominantly modern) development is the very considerable looting of tombs, which often includes their wholesale destruction. Although the aforementioned Captain Rees noticed the poor state of many cairns in the desert already almost a century ago, the scale of the tomb robbing has increased very significantly in the past decade. Indeed, most of the large and visually prominent cairns have been pillaged in recent years, leading to an immense loss of cultural knowledge and insight into ancient mortuary customs in the basalt wasteland (see, e.g., Kersel and Chesson 2013 on the devastating consequences of looting in Jordan).

Other constraints relating to matters of skeletal preservation and regular reuse of the tombs are inherent in the research of cairn burials. During our surveys and excavations, the levels of preservation were so poor that skeletons were often crushed by the overlying rocks. Moreover, their vicinity to the surface made them very vulnerable to the fluctuating and extreme climatic conditions of the area. The activities of insects and rodents often exacerbated the poor preservation of skeletal remains or in some cases left no bones at all. Indeed, the well-known passage from the book of Genesis (3:19), "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return," should be taken literally in the desert. Cairns also appear to have been frequently reused, even long after their original date of construction. Often the reuse could only be accomplished through disturbing or even obliterating older burials in the mounds. The custom of constructing cairns for burial seems to have ended in the Jebel Qurma range around the fourth



Figure 9. Aerial photo of a typical “ring cairn” at the site of QUR-9 (structure 5). The circular burial chamber in the heart of the cairn is clearly visible, with a cover of basalt blocks around it.

century C.E., although many preexisting cairns received new interments long after that. Cairns, it appears, were avoided for the disposal of the dead during almost the entire Islamic period and only were commonly reused for graves from the (late) Ottoman period onwards. The latter observation is at odds with commonly held perceptions of the Muslim treatment of the dead; however, Jenny Bradbury has recently (2016) argued against an idealized, static, or uniform portrayal of Islamic burial practice, underscoring instead the considerable variation over time and space.

Hilltop burials in the desert are often notoriously difficult to date, owing to factors such as their limited preservation, their often generic morphology, and the palimpsest of contents resulting from their continual reuse. With regard to the abundance of prehistoric sites in the Jebel Qurma region (Akkermans, Huijens, and Brüning 2016), we may assume that many cairns in the area are likewise prehistoric in origin. There is however little or nothing to substantiate this claim at present. The earliest securely dated cairns in the Jebel Qurma basalt uplands belong to the Early Bronze Age, while many more cairns, it appears, date to more recent historical periods.

An Early Bronze Age Cemetery

An extensive burial field, consisting of some fifty small cairns up to 2.2 m across and 1.2 m in height, is located high on the slope of a basalt-covered hillock. It has a panoramic view over the meandering flood plain of Wadi Rajil, a major route through the basalt and an excellent location given its seasonal opportunities for water provisions. The area selected for cairn construction was used previously for groupings of stone-walled enclosures, and had large concentrations of concave truncation burins of Late Neolithic date (ca. 6400–6100 B.C.E.; see Betts 2013). The cairns were clearly later extensions, partly set on the enclosures’

walls; the contemporary site(s) for the living community connected with the cemetery remains elusive so far.

Our excavations made clear that the cairns (fig. 2) were all constructed in roughly the same way. First, a small, low corbelled burial chamber was made. Second, the burial chamber was surrounded by a ring of large stones (sometimes stacked two or three courses high). Third, the space between the chamber and the outer ring was filled in with stones, adding both stability and visibility to the cairn. In some cases, the burial chambers were corbelled in their entirety; in other cases they were closed by one or more large and flat capstones. The chambers were always roughly round in shape, between 0.7 and 1 m in diameter and 0.4–0.7 m high; hence, they cannot have been used for interment in supine position but must have facilitated contracted burial, with the deceased resting on its side. Unfortunately the preservation of the skeletal remains in the tombs was extremely poor, with at most a few small fragments of bones or teeth remaining.

Only very few of the dead were provided with grave goods. One cairn yielded a flint tabular scraper, while four other burials each had a single pottery vessel in the shape of a small, short-necked jar with a flat base and, sometimes, loop handles (fig. 3). These pots are closely reminiscent of the *amphoriskoi* found at, for example, Tell Umm Hammad and its associated necropolis at Tiwal esh-Sharqi in the central Jordan Valley (see, e.g., Tubb, Henderson, and Wright 1990; Kennedy 2015), or in the cemeteries of Bab edh-Dhra and Fifa near the Dead Sea (Schaub and Rast 1989; Chesson and Schaub 2007). Given the material, these comparisons point towards a date in the late Early Bronze Age (ca. 2300–2000 B.C.E.) for the cairn field in the Jebel Qurma region.

Significantly, the abandonment of the cemetery—and, by association, the places for the corresponding living community—seems to have coincided with the wholesale withdrawal from the Jebel Qurma region for a period of roughly 1,500–2,000 years,



Figure 10. Aerial photo of a “pendant burial” in the Jebel Qurma range. The chain consisting of about twenty small, individual cairns leads to the left of the large cairn at the head. Photo by Rebecca Banks, APAAME_20130418_REB-0197.

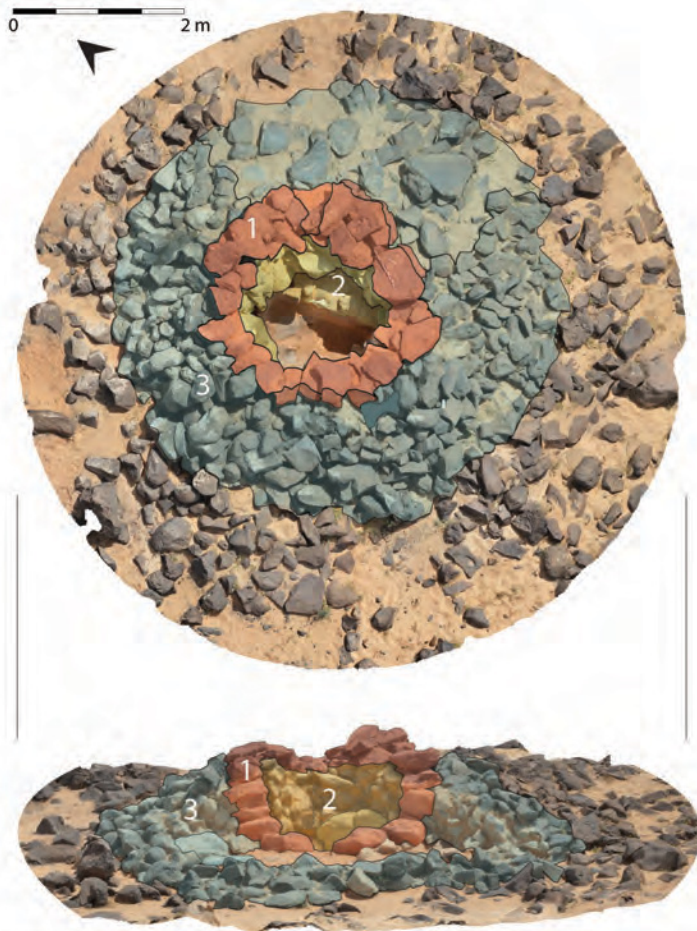


Figure 11. The ring cairn 9 at the site of QUR-9. The image above shows the plan of the cairn, while the image below is a 3D section through the same cairn. (1) the circular ring of stones bounding the burial chamber; (2) the interior of the burial chamber; (3) the stone cover around the burial chamber.

from the late third millennium B.C.E. until the occurrence of the so-called Safaitic groups in the late first millennium B.C.E. The apparent absence of find spots for such a long period of time is remarkable and remains as yet unexplained, although few and disparate sites from this period can be found at the fringes of the desert. Notable

examples include the Iron Age settlements and graveyard in the vicinity of Qaf and Ithra at the onset of the Wadi Sirhan, near the Saudi-Jordan border (Adams et al. 1977: 36).

Tower Tombs and Ring Cairns

A major renewal of local settlement appears to have taken place from the Hellenistic to the Ummayyad periods, from about the third century B.C.E. to the eighth century C.E. Stone-walled enclosures and irregular clearings about 20–50 m across, many of which yielded limited distributions of pottery, may have served as regular but short-lived camping sites. Mortuary practices continued the previous way of erecting cairns over the dead on prominent elevations, yet novel types of burial made their appearance in this period.

An outstanding example is the emergence of monumental round structures up to 5 m in diameter and 1.5 m high, which differ from the other cairns by their distinct tower-like shape and their clear, straight facade made of large, flattened basalt slabs (fig. 4). Moreover, these “tower tombs” originally lacked the conical covering heap of stones so characteristic of almost all other cairns in the basalt region. Whenever the tower tombs did have a massive stone cover, it appears to have been due to the construction of secondary graves against the tower at a later stage. Each tower was solidly filled in with basalt boulders, except for the small, corbelled burial chamber covered with capstones in its center. Although in most cases the chamber had been breached, some human bones and grave goods (mainly jewelry) were still in and around it.

The tower tombs tend to carry some Safaitic inscriptions and petroglyphs (fig. 5), with many more in their immediate surroundings. They are often considered to have a funerary meaning (cf. Macdonald 2015; Al-Jallad 2015, and references therein, for a recent evaluation). However, our excavations indisputably revealed that the towers were built with rocks that had already previously been inscribed with Safaitic texts, and so they must postdate the inscriptions. A number of radiocarbon dates from tower tombs in the Jebel Qurma region suggest a date for their construction between the first century

Figure 12. The grave of a young man, buried in an extremely contracted position on his side inside the ring cairn 9 at QUR-9. The well-preserved skeletal remains were radiocarbon-dated to 425–580 cal C.E. (95.4% reliability).



B.C.E. and the first century C.E., although they appear to have been reused repeatedly for burial in later periods.

Several tower tombs had rectangular cist graves attached to them, which were up to 2.7 m long, 1.5 m wide, and 1 m high, and oriented roughly east–west (fig. 6). The cist burials had carefully constructed dry-stone walls with smooth outer facades, and their interiors were entirely filled with rocks. Underneath the piles of stone were the skeletal remains of one, or sometimes two, individuals, who lay in a crouched position with the head to the east, facing north. Relatively rich finds were recovered from the cist graves, including necklaces made of colorful stone, glass paste, and shell, as well as rings made of bronze and iron (figs. 7 and 8). In one tomb there were five bronze earrings, each adorned with a centerpiece of semiprecious stone flanked by pearls or small glass beads (fig. 8, nos. 1–3). There was also an iron cloak pin or, perhaps, a belt buckle among the skeletal remains. Interestingly, one cist grave had four Seleucid bronze coins (Charon's obol immediately comes to mind), one of which could be securely dated to the reign of Antiochus IX (114–95 B.C.E.). A radiocarbon sample from skeletal remains in another cist grave gave a much later date in the first to second century C.E.

The coins were evidently nonlocal products, as were the metal and glass pieces of jewelry, which must have been procured through direct or indirect exchange with urban environments beyond the desert where such materials were typically manufactured. On the other hand, some of the beads and pendants made of limestone and shells of land snails may have been produced by the desert communities themselves.

Tower tombs are relatively rare in the Jebel Qurma region and the basalt region at large, and their distribution is restricted to prominent high rises near major routes through the basalt wasteland. A much more common type of burial was the so-called “ring cairn,” which measures up to 8 m in diameter and 2 m high (fig. 9). Ring cairns often had a chain of five to fifty small cairns attached to them (fig. 10), and it is easy to see why these

installations are sometimes called “pendants” (see Kennedy 2011: 3189–90). Our excavation of several of these smaller cairns revealed that they were simple piles of stone, some built more carefully than others, but with no evidence whatsoever of a burial in or underneath them. David Kennedy has suggested that these cairns in chains served to commemorate a respected deceased individual by erecting small stone heaps in the course of successive visits (2011: 3190).

The ring cairns differ from the tower tombs not only because of their abundant occurrence or their common trail of smaller cairns, but also because of their method of construction. They had a roughly finished circular burial chamber about 2–3 m in diameter, which was always concealed underneath a substantial deposit of stones, giving these cairns their typical conical shape (fig. 11). Moreover, the burial chamber was nearly always entirely filled in with stone, with the rocks directly piled upon the dead.

The date of construction of these ring cairns remains uncertain for a variety of reasons and OSL (Optically Stimulated Luminescence) determinations are currently awaited to solve the matter. There is substantial evidence for the contin-

“The graveyards reflect a consistent habit of bringing the dead to specific grounds imbued with social meaning and memory—sites that were vital to the desert communities.”

ual reuse of the cairns over the ages, from the Hellenistic period until the late Ottoman or even modern times. One ring cairn revealed the perfectly preserved remains of a young man aged between 21 and 30 years at the time of death. He was resting on his right side in an extremely contracted position, with the head to the east and the face looking north (fig. 12). A radiocarbon sample gave a date in the fifth or sixth centuries C.E. (Byzantine period) for this grave.

Significantly, no grave goods were associated with this male burial. However, a golden earring (see fig. 8, no. 4) and a number of beads made of stone, glass, faience, and bronze were found, together with a few human teeth fragments, in the stone cover outside of the burial chamber proper. These finds, we believe, were the remnants of an earlier burial, which was removed from the central chamber when the young male was interred in it.

Commemorative Places

The many cairns in the Jebel Qurma region served the needs of local communities in the disposition of their dead over time. While the number of cairns currently identified in the area totals in the many hundreds, the actual number of men, women, and children buried in them must be much higher, because of their regular reuse. The cairns are widely distributed across the

basalt-strewn upland terrain, and they usually occur either alone or in small groups of two or three. Their clustering into more substantial cemeteries has been established only in a few instances, with the Early Bronze Age cairn field described above as the clearest example. The graveyards reflect a consistent habit of bringing the dead to specific grounds imbued with social meaning and memory—sites that were vital to the desert communities.

Additionally we should not simply conclude that the many singular burial cairns were merely pragmatic, ad hoc containers for the dead placed randomly in the landscape. Their common placement on eye-catching elevations that afford panoramic vantage points was a key consideration for the cairn builders, with maximum prominence and visibility in mind. The elaborate tower tombs in particular were powerful and permanent vehicles for commemorating the dead and linked the past and present in a highly visual and public way. Far from being “secretive” or understood by insiders only, these tombs were easily recognized by locals and foreign visitors to the region alike and may have inspired awe and reverence. These burial grounds must have been liminal places full of social memory; the continual reuse and the repeated burial events at these sites over many centuries confirm their long-lived role as focal points for social and ritual gatherings of the communities in the area.

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